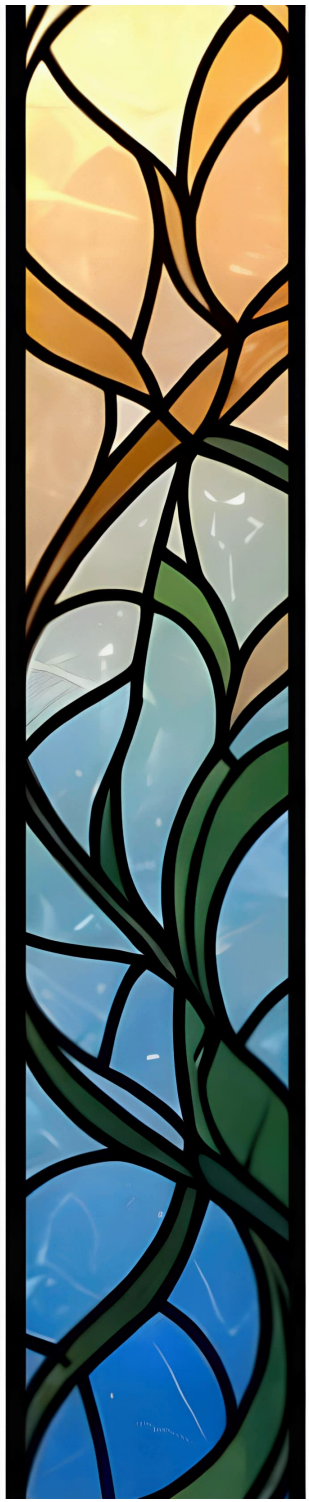

The Fourth Draft

— Ksh

The Fourth Draft

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The boy counted his steps
One , two , three , fou—then he stopped
The fourth one-it never felt right something was wrong with it but he didn't knew what

The library was quiet with all the people gone just the staff there , night was silent with the quarter moon , the place filled with smell of ink and dust.

Mrs Hartwell was sitting by the table on the reception tired of the work of the day , sipping her coffee while turning the pages of a novel and it could be noticed that the lazy rhythm of turns of the page were from re reading a book again.
Her colleague with the hot brew of coffee approached her , looking around seeing that the library was empty, she said softly "everyone left ? Shall we lock it up ?"

Mrs Hartwell replied "almost...he is still here"

"He is here again ? He barely reads much these days , he just walks by the shelves looking at the books"

Mrs Hartwell yawns and replies "he used to be a genius in the town...or maybe in the kingdom but now he just have lost his mind. He is for sure a lunatic now"

"Elias was his name, right ?"

There was inaudible whispers and Elias moving cautiously by the shelves he looked at the books but didn't took them out the most was he touched the spines...why was he here if he didn't wanted to read ? Who knows...he just sketched few of the bookshelves.
He looked at the sky through the window seeing it's already night , he went by the reception, not making an eye contact with the receptionist just quickly checked out and left.

Mrs Hartwell saw that even Elias at last had left the library, decided to lock the library and go home. She puts her book down on the table and starts to gather her stuff.
Her colleague looks at the book cover and said curiously "didn't you complete that book last week ? Are you re reading?"
Mrs Hartwell made a soft smile but with grief "uhhm...yes , my favourite character died at last so when I am rereading from the start it feels like he is back alive"

The library's doors were locked , the candles vanished left the shelves in dark , maybe that's where the knowledge dwells.

"Hhh…uhh-h."
Cold sweat clung to his forehead, breath unsteady, eyes sore and confused.

Elias still in blanket looking around the room with confusion.
The room was a mess- crumbled papers , the smell of ink , unfolded clothes and cracks of window glass , the dishes sinked up...Drip..Drip...the leaking tap breaking the silence like a ticking clock.

He muttered "Tch!... forgot it...a...again"

Hesitantly he got out of the sheets with the tired yet cautious gaze. A shower didn't wash away the exhaustion, nor did the change of clothes. He grabbed his sketchbook, diary, and a few books before stepping outside.

Just like everyday the town was alive , maybe today more than ever. The birds were chipping , cats roaming with the laziness, the shopkeepers lifting the shutters , kids playing with the early excitement for the day.

Elias walked by the town , but he didn't belong there...he never did.

"Oh there comes the fallen genius , hmph!"
"I used to admire him, but now… he just scares me. He looks like a lunatic"
Whispers of the people had never been less for him yet not enough to pull him from his own tangled thoughts. Nothing just the answers can wake him. He used to be brilliant. A mind sharper than most, a face people turned to admire. But now he was a ghost of that man.

The whispers seemed to be low after he was out of the crowded area of the town yet the gaze still lingered upon him.

Something woke him up from his deep thoughts- A tiny ball with red and blue strips on it , hurdling down the street just to stop by his feet giving it a small nudge.

A young boy about one third of Elias's age came after the ball.

Elias picked up the ball and reached out his hand to return the ball , the boy took the ball but started at him curiously…until the boys mother came in the frame and took the boy in her arms , she didn't say anything just gave a sharp gaze , her hands folded on her kid as protecting a fruit from getting rotten by another fruit.

Elias didn't wonder much about the scene and just walked away , of course as he didn't had anything to say nor anyone who will listen.

Grumble!

"forgot to eat breakfast…should have realised it…"

He kept walking with the unease in his chest but stomach continues to growl demanding for food.

After all being a human , food is necessity.

He stopped by a grocery store.

The bell above the door chimes , the shop is not much crowded, the shopkeeper knew that someone came in but didn't look towards the door.

Elias grabbed something quick to eat and went to the counter , while he was getting money out of his almost empty wallet ,the shopkeeper speaks sincerely “why don’t you get a job ,kid”

Elias teeth bit his tongue. He looked at the shopkeeper and opened his mouth to say something but not a single word came out.

“There’s no point…no one will understand.”

He placed some crippled notes and coins in payment and left the shop.

He walked towards the orchard with a fast pace , not to not get noticed by others , not to not hear whispers , but to avoid the gazes that lingers on him.

Elias reached the park and sank onto the first empty bench he could find.
The wooden seat was cold beneath him. He pulled his coat tighter around himself and exhaled.

The wind carried the scent of freshly cut grass, but it felt distant, muted, like something remembered rather than experienced. The world around him moved, lived, existed-yet Elias felt like an outsider to it all.

He pulled a book from his bag, flipping it open to a random page. His eyes scanned the words , but he has trouble reading.
Blurred, Unfocused.
He blinked hard and tried again , but still the same problem.

The sentences twisted together, letters melting into meaningless symbols. Like ink bleeding across wet paper.
A headache throbbed behind his temple. His hands clenched the edges of the book as frustration crawled up his spine.

"I just need sleep."
That had to be it. He barely slept anymore-just brief, restless hours that

left him more exhausted than before. If anyone was watching they would surely say that he had insomnia.

Elias sighed, shutting the book and setting it beside him. He leaned back, gaze shifting upward.
And then he felt something.

His chest tightened. His fingers twitched. A slow, creeping unease slithered under his skin, spreading through his limbs like ice. He lowered his gaze cautiously, scanning the park.

Empty benches.
Distant passers-by.
Nothing out of place.
And yet…
A sharp, mocking sound yet filled with pity.

Elias turned his head and saw them-a small group of teenagers, lingering by the park's edge. They weren't trying to hide it. Their stares, their whispers, their amusement at his expense.

"That's him, right?" one of them muttered, loud enough to be heard.
"Yeah, the freak who talks to himself."
"My grandma says he used to be smart. Can you believe that?"

Elias looked away.
Not out of shame. Not out of anger.
Just…emptiness.

He had heard it all before. The words were nothing new. Just another part of the daily routine.
He exhaled and tilted his head back again, staring at the sky. The vast, endless blue stretched above him, its depth swallowing the world whole.

What was he looking for?
Did he even know?

Maybe, if he stared long enough, searched hard enough, he'd finally understand.

Elias let out a slow breath, tilting his head back to stare at the sky. The endless stretch of blue swallowed his thoughts whole. The clouds drifted aimlessly, changing shape with the wind.

His fingers pressed against the wooden bench, grounding himself. This moment-he'd been here before, hadn't he? No, not exactly. Something was different. But what?

He exhaled sharply, shaking his head.
No. Thinking like that led nowhere. He was just exhausted. That was all. He needed sleep, needed food-he had far more real problems to deal with than chasing ghosts in his mind.

A hollow laugh almost escaped his lips. "Hh...Real problems"
As if anything about his life was real anymore.

His gaze dropped back to the pages of his book, but the words blurred together. His eyes ached. His thoughts tangled, slipping through his fingers like sand. With a sigh, he closed it and set it aside.
He rubbed his temples. But the unease lingered. The feeling of being watched hadn't faded completely. He swallowed, trying to dismiss the thought. He refused to look over his shoulder.

You're just imagining it.

His fingers tapped against the bench once. Then twice. Then a third time. His muscles tensed. A small shiver ran up his spine.

Then-
A noise!
Footsteps, Voices , Chaos! ,All together.

Elias's head turned sharply, heart stuttering.
A sharp scream tore through the air.
"Fire! The library—!"

The distant hum of the town erupted into frantic shouts. Heavy footsteps pounded against the pavement as people rushed past him. Thick, acrid smoke curled into the sky, dark and suffocating.
Elias's breath caught. His hands instinctively scrambled for his bag, shoving his sketchbook and diary inside with shaky fingers. The exhaustion, the hunger, the unease-forgotten in an instant.

The library was on fire.

And Elias was already moving before he could think.

His breath came out in ragged gasps, his feet slamming against the ground as he pushed forward, barely aware of the pages flying from his half-packed bag. He didn't stop to grab them. He didn't care about them at the moment.

The air grew thicker, hotter, tainted with the stench of burning paper and wood. The orange glow ahead flickered wildly against the darkening sky.
By the time he reached the town square, a crowd had already gathered. The library-library-was burning. The flames clawed at the sky, swallowing the walls, the roof, the stories inside.

People stood in clusters, watching, talking, some frantically trying to douse the fire with buckets of water. But there was no urgency in their movements. They already knew. The fire had won.

"Could've been an accident," someone muttered, shaking his head. "A candle left burning, maybe."

"No, no. That place didn't even have open flames," another voice argued. "It's too sudden. Too big."

A man scoffed. "Then what? Someone did it on purpose? Who the hell would want to burn a damn library?!"

Elias clenched his fists. He wasn't listening. He wasn't thinking. He just needed to get inside.
He took a step forward.

A firm hand grabbed his arm, yanking him back.
"The hell are you doing?!" A man glared at him, his grip tight, rough with callouses. Others turned to look. More hands. More voices.

"You out of your mind?"

"You'll die in there, idiot!"

"Of course it's him. The lunatic wants to jump into the fire. Fitting, isn't it?"

Elias tried to shake them off. He had to get in. He had to check.

"Let go." His voice came out rough, barely audible.

They didn't.
But Elias had always been good at slipping away. A skill learned young. A skill learned from necessity.

The grip on his arms-it brought him back to a kitchen bathed in dim evening light, where the air was thick with the scent of spilled tea and burnt toast.

He had been small then, barely reaching the counter, his hands still clumsy with the weight of porcelain. The cup had slipped before he could stop it-shattering against the floor, scattering jagged pieces like fallen stars.

Silence. A sharp intake of breath. Then footsteps.
He had known what came next. The routine was always the same.
The fingers around his wrist were iron, nails pressing into his skin—not enough to bruise, but enough to hold. Enough to remind him that he had no choice but to stay, to face it.

Then-a twist, a slip, a moment of weightlessness.

But by then, he had already made it outside, where the air was cool, where his lungs could finally expand. Where the night did not try to hold him down.

His mother never chased him past the door.
She never needed to. Because he always came back.

The hands held tight-but not tight enough. He twisted, ducked, broke free.
Then he ran.
Straight into the burning library

The heat swallowed him whole.
Smoke curled into his lungs, thick and suffocating, clinging to his throat like something alive. Every breath burned. Every step wavered. The fire was everywhere-devouring shelves ,swallowing books, turning years of stories into ashes swirling in the air.

But he had to reach it.

Elias staggered forward, dodging a collapsing beam, his vision swimming from the smoke. The bookshelves loomed through the haze, their spines blackened, their pages curling and crumbling but they were still there.

He dropped to his knees ,his fingers scrambling to open his bag ,flipping through the sketchbook with shaking hands. He scanned the pages his breathing ragged.

Then ,he found it.

His sketch-hastily drawn lines capturing the rows of bookshelves, the placement of every title, the structure of every column. He held it up, comparing, scanning the shelves through stinging eyes.

His head swayed. His grip loosened. A strange, sinking sensation crawled through his body.

The smoke blurred everything. The fire roared louder. The weight of exhaustion dragged him down.
His body gave in.
The sketchbook slipped from his grasp as Elias collapsed into the flames.

A dull ache pulsed in Elias's skull as he blinked awake. The scent of dried herbs and something faintly metallic clung to the air. Dim candlelight flickered against wooden walls, casting elongated shadows that swayed with the breeze slipping through a window and a painting with a happy family trapped in a frame made of oak wood having fine carvings placed above the table.

The town doctor's clinic.

Elias shifted slightly, his body stiff , muscles aching like rusted gears forced to turn. His throat was dry, his mind still foggy from the heat and smoke. But the moment he stirred, a gruff voice cut through the silence.

"You could have died in there ,boy."

Doctor stood by a worn wooden desk, grinding herbs in a mortar. His face, lined with age and years of seeing fools walk straight into death, barely held an expression beyond mild irritation.

Elias exhaled, sitting up with effort. He didn't reply.
The doctor didn't seem to expect him to. He continued, voice steady but edged with something close to frustration. "You think you understand the world, but what you chase is an illusion. The fire was real. The burns on your hands-" his eyes flickered down at Elias's fingers, raw and reddened, "-those were real. What was it worth?"

Elias rubbed his palms against his coat, staring down at them as if the answer were hidden in his own skin that has now burnt scar patterns over his first and wrist.

Dr. let out a sigh, softer this time. He set the pestle down and turned to face him fully. "You were brilliant once. It's a damn shame to see you like this" His voice lost its earlier harshness settling into something quieter, something almost… patient. "You still have that sharp mind, even if it's tangled in places it shouldn't be. Use it..."

Elias barely moved.

The doctor leaned back against the desk, arms crossed. "Come work here" The words were casual, but there was weight behind them. "You need something to keep you anchored before you drift off completely" sighs "I may not be able to pay you much but it will at least keep you living."

The offer lingered in the air, like a rope tossed to a drowning man.

Elias's fingers curled slightly. For a moment, it seemed like he might consider it. That he might say something.

But the moment passed. He stood up, steady now, his movements deliberate. Without a word, he slung his bag over his shoulder and walked to the door.

Doctor didn't stop him. Didn't call him back. He only watched as Elias disappeared into the night, shaking his head slightly before returning to his work.

The town was quiet, the streets lined with soft pools of lamplight. The air was cool, but it did nothing to shake the weight pressing down on Elias's thoughts.

By the time he looked up, he was already standing in front of Miss Hartwell's house.

Elias knocked.

The sound was sharp against the stillness of the night. For a moment, there was no response, just the distant hum of crickets and the occasional rustling of wind against the wooden houses. Then, the faint creak of floorboards inside

The door cracked open just enough for Miss Hartwell's face to appear. Her expression was the same as always-tried, vaguely annoyed, as if she had expected him to come and was already exhausted by the thought of speaking to him.

"You again?" she muttered, not bothering to hide her irritation. "You should be in bed, not roaming around like some restless ghost"

Elias barely registered the remark. His eyes flickered past her, to the dimly lit interior of her home, before snapping back to her face. "Did anyone come after I left the library last night?" His voice was quiet but firm, laced with something urgent beneath its usual tiredness.

Miss Hartwell frowned. "What?"

"After I left," Elias repeated, the words coming faster now. "Did anyone enter the library?"

She exhaled through her nose, rubbing her temple as if speaking to him was giving her a headache. "I don't keep track of every fool who steps into that place."

"But the bookshelf," he pressed on, voice tight. "The one near the window. Did you move any books from there?"

Miss Hartwell gave him a long, unimpressed look, then scoffed. "Do you think I have the time to memorize where every single book is?"

Something in Elias's chest tightened. He searched her face for any sign of recognition, any flicker of hesitation but there was none. Either she was lying, or… or she really didn't remember.

His fingers curled against his coat, but he forced his voice to stay even. "You're sure?"

"Positive."
Then, without another word, she shut the door in his face.

Elias stood there for a few seconds, staring at the wood as if it might change, as if it might open again and give him a different answer.

It didn't.

He turned away, his feet moving automatically as he made his way back through the sleeping town.

The streets were darker now, the glow of streetlamps flickering weakly against the night. Their light wavered-one, two, three-before the fourth could burn, the wind suddenly died.

The flame stilled.

And Elias, mid-step, felt the world hold its breath with him.
He reached home and like always without giving even a single glance around the room that is in complete mess he just sat on his table by the window where moonlight struck it's glow. He lit the lamp and held the pen...the usual routine as every night.

Elias sat at his desk, hunched over his notebook, ink smudging his fingertips. The dim lamp flickered against the pages, casting shifting shadows over his hurried scribbles. His mind was racing , trying to capture every detail before it slipped away.

He had figured something out. He wasn't sure if he was getting closer to an answer or further lost in his own head. He just had to prove something...to whom ? He wasn't sure of that himself.

Morning came without him realizing. The lamp had long burnt out. His hand ached from writing, but the moment he lifted his head, hunger clawed at his stomach. When was the last time he ate?

Pushing himself up, Elias left his home and walked down the quiet streets. The morning chill clung to the air, townsfolk beginning to set up stalls and open their shops. He reached the small eatery-a modest place with wooden benches and the scent of warm bread drifting through the air-A place he often visits whenever he remembers that he has to eat.

The waitress, a young woman with a cheerful and kind expression, glanced at him as she wiped down a table. “Same as usual?” she asked.

Elias blinked. Something about that felt… off. But he nodded, taking his seat.

As he waited, he pulled out his notebook again, flipping through his notes. The pieces were there-he just needed to fit them together. He scrawled a few more lines, lost in thought, when a small voice broke through his focus.

“Hey, mister.”

He looked up. A little girl stood beside him, staring with wide, curious eyes. Her dress was slightly crumpled from play, and she clutched a small, worn-out stuffed rabbit in one hand.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” she asked, tilting her head.

Elias blinked, caught off guard. The question felt oddly fitting for him, yet also completely unexpected.

Elias stared at the girl, her question lingering in the air. She was small, maybe six or seven, with bright eyes that held none of the wariness the rest of the town had when they looked at him. She was waiting for an answer, completely trusting, completely unaware of who he was supposed to be.

He exhaled, tapping his fingers against the table. “I do… and I don’t,” he finally said. “I have no proof, so they exist and they don’t. They could be watching us right now… or not.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “Really?”

For a moment, Elias almost smirked at how seriously she took his words. But then he realized-he was talking to a child. His mind was too tangled in thoughts, too used to questioning everything. He had to fix this answer for her age.

He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice like he was sharing a secret. "But," he added, "if you don't listen to your mother or break things, what will happen ? she'll get angry and that's worse than any ghost."

The girl gasped, clutching her rabbit. "Worse than a ghost?"

Elias nodded, feigning seriousness. "Far worse."

She giggled, clearly delighted, then rocked back on her heels. "Okay, I'll be good then!"

Something about her smile made his chest ache like something long forgotten, something he hadn't felt in years. Without thinking, he reached out hesitantly, ruffling her hair. It had been a long time since he'd touched another person so freely. His hand hovered for a moment before pulling away.

"Be good," he muttered.

The girl nodded and turned to run off-but then she hesitated. Her face fell, her small hands gripping the rabbit tighter.

"I… I think I lost my mom," she whispered.

Elias stiffened. "What?"

"When I was talking to you, she was there, but now she's gone…" Her voice wavered. "I don't know where she went."

Elias stared down at her. He could still see his notebook open, waiting for him. He had to write. He had to remember.

But the little girl was looking up at him with watery eyes, her fingers twisting into the fabric of her dress.

Elias sighed, rubbing his temple. He wasn't sure if he could even help. But…
"…Alright," he muttered. "Let's find her."

Elias walked down the quiet streets, the little girl's tiny fingers clutching his sleeve. The golden light of the setting sun stretched their shadows long over the cobblestone path. Despite her earlier panic, she now hummed softly, skipping a little to match his steps.

"You write a lot," she said, glancing at the notebook tucked under his arm.

Elias blinked, surprised by the sudden observation. "...yes."

She tilted her head. "Are you super smart?"

He hesitated. "I used to be."

She scrunched her nose, unimpressed. "Used to be? That's silly. Either you are or you aren't."

Elias found himself staring at her. She spoke without hesitation, without caution-just a child's simple honesty. She didn't know what the world thought of him, didn't flinch at his presence, didn't whisper behind his back.

For the first time in forever, someone wasn't looking at him with fear.

Before he could reply, she puffed out her chest. "You looked smart. That's why I asked you about ghosts."

A huff of air left his lips-almost a laugh.

They passed a small bakery, the scent of warm bread drifting through the cool evening air. Elias glanced at the little girl, then down at the few remaining coins in his pocket.

It's just a little.

He bought a small piece of chocolate and held it out to her. The moment she realized it was for her, her eyes lit up.

“For me?” she asked, looking between him and the chocolate as if he might take it back.

Elias nodded. She took it carefully, cradling it like something precious before breaking into a wide, delighted grin.

"You’re nice," she said, swinging her feet happily as she nibbled at the chocolate.

"Nice..."

Such a simple word, yet it felt foreign like something that didn’t quite belong to him.

They walked through the dimming streets, her cheerful munching the only sound between them. The night was creeping in, lanterns flickering to life one by one. Elias should have been restless, the weight of his thoughts pressing down on him as usual.
But for a little while, just for a moment-he wasn’t.

As the sun dipped lower, the search for the girl’s mother continued. The once-busy streets now carried an eerie quietness, interrupted only by distant chatter and the occasional passing cart. Elias, though exhausted, kept walking beside the girl, glancing down at her every so often. She seemed oddly at ease, trusting him completely.

Then, near a small market, the girl suddenly gasped and tugged at his sleeve. "Mama!" she cried, pointing at a woman who was frantically looking around.

Elias let out a quiet breath of relief and gently patted her head-this time, his touch less hesitant, a bit more natural. The girl beamed at him before running toward her mother.

The mother, however, froze when she saw who had brought her daughter back. Her face tensed with unease. For a moment, she didn’t move.

Elias took a small step back, knowing that reaction all too well. He kept his gaze low, waiting for the usual accusations, the nervous glances, the hushed whispers.

The woman finally reached for her daughter, pulling her close. Her grip was protective, wary. "Where were you?" she asked sternly.

"I got lost," the girl admitted, looking up at her mother with innocent eyes. Then, with a bright smile, she added, "But he helped me! He even bought me chocolate!"

The mother's gaze flickered between her daughter and Elias. There was hesitation, a flicker of doubt. But then she exhaled, her tense shoulders loosening just slightly. "Thank you," she said, her voice still cautious.

Elias nodded, not meeting her eyes.

The girl, seemingly unaffected by her mother's wariness, turned back to him. "Bye Bye, mister!" she chirped, waving.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Elias felt warmth spread through his chest. He managed a small, barely noticeable smile and waved back.

As he turned to leave, the mother's voice reached him once more, quieter this time. "Take care of yourself."

He didn't respond.

The night air was colder than before as he walked home. The streets were dimly lit by flickering candle lamps. He watched one closely. It wavered—once, twice, thrice.

He went to his house... today he didn't stay awake- he didn't wanted to. The scattered stuff around the house same as usual, what changed ? The lights went off earlier today. Elias slept as soon as he got in bed.

Elias awoke with a gasp, gasped again and again.

At first, he thought he had simply stirred from a troubled sleep, but something in the air felt wrong. The ceiling looked familiar, but the shadows clung too tightly to its corners. There was ink leaking from the cracks.

He sat up.
Or he thought he did.

The next moment he was back in bed. Again. The dream hadn't ended; it had folded. Layered like pages in a closed book.

His breath quickened.
In the next dream, something pressed against his neck -a soft, rhythmic nibbling, like the tip of a pen dragging across parchment.

Eyes floated above him now, lidless and watching. Not blinking , just observing. Murmuring mouths surrounded the walls, shaping words but speaking none.

"Wake up" he muttered to himself.

He pulled a blade from the drawer beside his bed. The one he kept for letters never for skin. With trembling hands, he cut his palm. The pain was sharp. Real ?

Then he woke up again.
Bleeding.
But not from the hand.
From his leg now.
He couldn't remember cutting there.

Again, the bed. Again the press of the pen. Again the mouths, now whispering his name, or something close to it.

Elias. Or something trying to sound like Elias.

This time, he didn't hesitate. He held the blade close, pressing it beneath his eye.
One more blink, and he was gone again.

The pen at the back of his neck now scraped bone.
The eyes hovered just inches from his face. He could smell the ink dripping from them.

"This one is too close," he whispered.
And he carved. Underneath the left eye. Deep.
The world shivered.

The pain bloomed violently but this time, it stayed. The sensation didn't vanish with the scene. There was blood on his cheek. His breath fogged the mirror. No sudden jumps. Just silent stare back to the mirror.

Just the sting of metal and the ache in his chest.

He was awake.
Probably.

He stood. Stumbled. Wiped the blood with the back of his sleeve. The wound was open, wet. His eye stung but his mind stung worse.

He said nothing as he threw on his coat and stepped outside.
The wound still throbbed, but at least it throbbed in real time.

He walked to the doctor's house. Slowly. Like dragging ink through paper.

The small wooden bell above the door chimed as Elias stepped in, one hand pressed against the cloth over his eye. The doctor, a middle-aged man with grey in his beard and ink-stains on his cuffs, looked up from his desk with a start.

"Good heavens…" he stood. "What did you do this time?"

Elias didn't answer. He just sat.

The doctor sighed as he unwrapped the makeshift cloth and examined the cut beneath Elias's eye.

"You're lucky," he muttered, dabbing gently. "Millimetres from blinding yourself."
He paused. "You must start sleeping properly. You walk around like a ghost, boy. And ghosts don't bleed this much."

Elias said nothing. He watched the doctor's hands-quick, practiced, still trembling just slightly.

The silence grew too heavy. Elias let his gaze drift.

There, on the corner of the desk, a small framed painting sat quietly - three people smiling under sunlight: the doctor, a woman, and a child holding a small wooden horse.

"You don't seem the smiling type," Elias murmured, nodding toward the painting.

The doctor stilled. His hand hovered mid-air.
"They're gone," he said quietly. "The last war took them."

Elias blinked. "…What war?"

The doctor looked up, surprised. "Two years ago. The southern kingdom's siege. You don't remember?"

Elias opened his mouth. Closed it.
No memories came. No battles. No mourning bells. No smoke in the streets.
...
Only the memory of ink. Dreams. Pen tips. A name being whispered again and again.

"I must've…forgotten," Elias muttered, almost to himself.

"Well," the doctor said, beginning to clear the stained cloths from the table, "loss does strange things to the mind. But forgetting a war…" He trailed off, glancing once at Elias with a flicker of something unreadable. Concern, perhaps. Or fear.

Elias stood, tugging his coat over his arm. The air outside was beginning to cool.

"Try not to come back with fewer eyes or limbs next time" the doctor muttered, voice quieter now.

Elias gave a faint nod and stepped outside. The street was empty, but warm light glowed behind shuttered windows. He pulled his coat tighter around himself and walked on.

Not toward home.

But toward the eatery. Something scratched at the walls of his memory

The eatery wasn't busy. It never was this early. Wooden chairs scraped softly, and the scent of broth and burnt flour hung low in the dim air. Elias took his usual seat by the window—back to the wall, eyes on the door.

He placed his worn notebook on the table, opened to the last page. The ink still smudged faintly near the margins from his bleeding hand the night before.

Footsteps approached.
The waitress smiled. "The meal that you order everyday ? Baked apple, honey coated oat cookies and spiced tea."

Elias froze.

That wasn't it.

She never said it like that. Not 'the meal that you order everyday?... specially not spiced tea' he never ordered spiced tea.

She always said: “Same as usual ?” Always with the same rise in pitch, like a ritual. A small comfort he had counted on without knowing.

He looked up. “What did you say?”

Waitress blinked. “uhh...meal that you order everyday? Baked apple with...honey coated oat cookies and spiced tea.”

“No,” Elias said. His voice was too sharp. “That’s not what you usually say.”

She tilted her head, trying to mask confusion. “I...I think I say that every time.”

“You don’t,” Elias insisted. His pulse was rising. “You say, ‘Same as usual ?’ You’ve said it for weeks. Every day. People don’t change habits like that without noticing. And you know very well that I don't like tea , I order coffee"

"Coffee?" Her smile faltered. “I mean… maybe I did say it like that. Does it matter?”

Clock ticks.

“Yes. Yes, it does.” He leaned forward. “Do you remember saying it yesterday?”

“I… I’m not sure. Maybe I changed it. Maybe I didn’t.”

“People don’t just change habitual phrases. It’s called linguistic patterning. It sticks. That’s how you know people ,by the things they repeat!. Habits. Phrases. Words! And you changed.”

Now she was uncomfortable. She took a step back. “You’re overthinking it.”

“No,” Elias whispered. “Something changed.”

He reached for his notebook, flipping back pages. His fingers trembled. The ink felt unfamiliar, the words written by someone else.

"I...I'll get your food," Elin muttered, retreating toward the kitchen. "You probably just need rest."

She disappeared behind the curtain.
Elias sat alone, the quiet pressing in. The warm smell of bread meant nothing now. He couldn't stop staring at the place where her words had gone wrong.
One phrase. One fracture. One thread tugged too hard.

The eatery door shut behind him with a soft chime, but Elias didn't look back. His footsteps echoed on the uneven path, and he walked without hurry, as though the day hadn't folded under strange whispers and invisible cracks.

When he reached home he didn't sit or sigh. He simply began... cleaning- something he didn't did for weeks now.
He folded clothes he hadn't worn in months, wiped the shelves of books he no longer read. Dusted the frames, realigned crooked paintings ,swept the corners he usually ignored. Each task flowed into the next, rhythmically. The way someone might clean a room before someone else moves in or out.

From a low drawer , he pulled out a worn box. Inside were paintings with edges curling. One showed a boy barely five, missing a tooth, smiling wide beside a woman with kind and beautiful brown eyes-His

mother. He stared at it longer than necessary. Then placed it back into the box ,shut the lid and slid it beneath the bed.

He moved like someone tending to a ritual while cleaning.

Then he bathed. Changed into clothes he used to wear when the world still made sense. A grey coat, too long at the sleeves, and boots that didn't match.

At the desk, he began to write.
The pen danced fast. He wrote without glancing at the clock, not even stopping to sip the coffee he made but didn't touch. Words flooded out ,notes, thoughts, diagrams, names. It was as if he had reached the final edge of something...and saw, at last, the map of it.

He paused only when the ink ran dry.

Close to midnight, he stood. Left the pages open.

He stepped outside. The cold greeted him with a familiar hum. His feet took him where he already knew they would : the ruins of the library.

The place hadn't changed. It was still broken and ash-scented, a skeleton of stories.
He moved through it gently. Past scorched beams, melted bindings. Toward the back-Bookshelf Eight. What was left of it.

He crouched. Picked up a book that had escaped the flames. It was intact. But inside? everything blank. The pages were perfect. Unmarked. As if they had never been written at all.

He didn't speak. Just sat down on the floorboards, now soft from smoke.

He looked at the stars through the hole in the ceiling. For once, they didn't seem far. Just...quiet.
And on his walk back home-
the lamp at the corner did not flicker today.

Morning arrived gently in the town, spilling pale light over uneven rooftops. A boy in boots too large for his feet kicked a can down the alley behind the baker's shop, laughing each time it clattered. The baker herself, arms dusted with flour, leaned out to scold him before disappearing back into the scent of rising bread.

By noon, the tailor argued with a customer about a missing button. The woman with the one-eyed cat sold three jars of pear jam before retreating to her porch to nap. Market stalls brimmed with colour- plums, cloth, copper trinkets. Coins clinked, conversations sparked, and pigeons made a mess of everything they touched.

A young man proposed to his sweetheart near the stone fountain. She dropped the ring, they both laughed, and it landed with a soft splash. The bookseller rearranged her windowsill display. A child threw a tantrum. Two old friends passed each other in the square and waved without stopping but another set of two walked as if they were strangers.

No one noticed the house with drawn curtains.

The waitress at the eatery worked a double shift. Her apron was stained by afternoon. A stranger from the next town arrived asking for directions, and a kind merchant gave him a map drawn on the back of a receipt.

And then the day passed into dusk.

Lanterns were lit. The butcher closed early. A woman left flowers outside the burnt library. A child pointed at the sky and said the stars were blinking too much tonight.

By night, The streets were quiet again.

The moon hovered above. And behind it all-
No one said his name.

The night was colder than it should have been.

The house stood untouched, the curtains were drawn. No light inside. No sound except the occasional creak of old wood adjusting to time. The table was clean. A single cup, half-filled with coffee. The lamp had long run out.

His coat still hung by the door.

In the study, a chair was pushed back awkwardly. Papers spread like wind-stirred leaves across the floor-drawings, fragments, underlined words. The journal lay open on the desk, ink smudged by what looked like water, but wasn't. The handwriting was smaller than usual and written with carefulness this time rather than urgency :

[I tried to forget. But forgetting is just pretending the story isn't written.]
[Maybe I wasn't supposed to know...yet I search for answers and the more I knew more stupid I became ?._]

Out back, where the ivy climbed up the garden wall and a lantern swung from a rusted nail, something shifted.

The tree in the corner stood straighter than usual, as if trying to bear the weight it hadn't asked for. Below it, a single boot in the grass. The other dangled above, unmoving.

He was there.
His fingers curled inward, relaxed.
The breeze nudged him gently, as if unsure whether to wake him.

Elias.

His eyes were half-shut. His mouth was not quite smiling, but not at rest either. There was something about his face-almost peaceful, or maybe it was just tired. One boot had slipped off and lay beneath him like a forgotten thought.

There was no blood.
No signs of struggle.
Only a garden. Only a rope.

•••

And from the silence, a voice emerged. Calm. Familiar. Watching.

"Ah, Elias !… *my stupidest creation*."

A sigh - not of grief, not of relief. Something... in between.

"You clawed at the seams of your world, peeled back the layers I'd hidden. You saw the ink before it dried. Heard whispers that weren't meant for your ears. And you kept going."

There was a pause. Almost fond.
"You weren't written for this. But you did it anyway."

Then the voice turned inward , thinking aloud. Softly. Like someone pacing a dim room.

"Curious little things, aren't they? Eyes that kept turning pages."

"They sat through your nightmares. They watched you fall apart. They wanted to know what happened next. while you were trapped here...haha!"
"Even now, they linger."
"Even now, *they read.*"

A low chuckle.

"And *I…I* just kept writing. Draft after draft Each worse for you, better for them."

“But what’s the harm?”
“All it takes is few turn back… and you’ll *live again*.”

The journal rustles.
The wind picks up.
And in the darkness beneath the tree, Elias stirs. The voice fades as if it was never there.

"And...this concludes *The fourth draft.*"

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